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NATHAN HALE,

A POEM,

DELIVERED BEFORE

The Alumni Association

OF

COLUMBIA COLLEGE,

OCTOBER 27, 1858.

BY

JOHN MAC MULLEN, A. M.

NEW YORK:
JOHN F. TROW, PRINTER, 377 & 379 BROADWAY,
CORNER OF WHITE STREET.
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NATHAN HALE:

A POEM,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Alumni Association of Columbia College,

OCTOBER 27, 1858.

BY JOHN MAC MULLEN, A.M.

Come all Alumni gather round ;
I tell of courage high ;
Of Nathan Hale, a college boy,
One not afraid to die.
His father a stout yeoman was ;
In Coventry his birth ;
And never shone the golden sun
On one of loftier worth.

'Twas leafy June when he was born ;
Dame Earth was in her best,
When his mother smiled, and the grave Deacon
His little boy caressed.
They little thought that he, so small
And tender, lying there,
Was of hero-mould ; had a head to plan,
And a heart could boldly dare.

He sported 'neath the maple-leaf,
And the oak-tree's sturdy bough,
Till his limbs grew long, and his bones grew strong;
And few could him follow.
To ride, to shoot, to speak the truth,
To wrestle, jump, and climb,
Such was the life his frame to knit,
His courage to sublime.

They thought to make him a man of God,
And the village pastor, he
Taught him the tongues of Greece and Rome
With their deeds of chivalry.
How Brutus the consul stern adjudged
His traitor sons to death:
How Curtius leaped in the yawning gulf
That closed ere they drew their breath:

How Decius stood on the blood-stained spear,
And doomed himself to die;
And how the Fabii fought and fell,
That house so great and high.
He read of Thermopylæ—sainted name—
And of proud Platæa's day,
And of him so prompt his Thebes to serve
In the highest or humblest way.

O ! heroes of old, so true and bold,
Undying and sacred band !
How many ye've taught who have valiantly fought
For Freedom and Fatherland !
Your spirit has breathed from the pages read
In every College hall,
Till their upturned thrones have crushed the bones
Of oppressors proud and tall.

And never a nobler youth hath read,
In these chronicles of old,
Of the steadfast men who honor loved
Far more than life or gold.
His fine eye flashed, and his red cheek glowed,
And his head was lifted high,
As he dreamed that he, in a noble cause,
Full gallantly might die.

He little thought that a few short years
Should see him calmly stand,
With an eye undimmed and a cheek unblenched
In the midst of a hostile band :
And that never bold Roman or gallant Greek,
In their proudest days, could say
More heroic words than his youthful lips
Gave forth on their dying day.

When he entered the halls of Mother Yale,
And trod beneath her elm,
He seemed some heaven-sent Mercury,
With winged feet and helm ;
For he was tall, well knit, and strong ;
No goodlier youth was seen :
And in after years men proudly showed
His leap on the College Green.

Many a maiden turned again
His graceful form to scan,
Where nature featly had conjoined
All that delights in man.
The sparkling eye, the noble brow,
The bearing frank and free,
The pleasant wit, the genial smile,
The inborn courtesy.

The priests of old from out their herds
The goodliest always chose ;
Upon fair Freedom's altar he
Was offered even as those ;
And of all the glorious martyrs bold
That for mankind have died,
None more unflinchingly stood up
In the bloom of manly pride.

To earn his bread like an honest man,
When his college days were o'er,
He took his seat at the teacher's desk
And taught what he learned before.
The path of knowledge still he smoothed,
And strewed it o'er with flowers ;
And all have said that 'neath his rule
Swift fled the happy hours.

'Twas thus two years in peace had passed,
Till war was on the gale.
The yeomen saw the gath'ring cloud,
But were not men to quail.
It burst at last on Lexington :
It burst in bloody rain :
And through the land the cry rang out,
"Our brethren have been slain !"

This war-cry to New London came,
Where Hale sat in his school.
Then straightway rose the hero up ;
Left copy-book and rule.
"I've passed among you pleasant days ;
But those pleasant days are o'er.
My country calls ; I leave my books,
And gird me up for war."

Lieutenant by Connecticut,
By Congress Captain made,
He girt fast to his slender waist
His bloodless battle-blade.
New London his first station was ;
But soon the eastern camp,
Before beleaguered Boston, heard
His and his comrades' tramp.

No carpet-knights were these young men ;
Their station was in front.
Of sorties from the penned-up foe
They often bore the brunt.
To Putnam's tent he often went ;
Spencer and Sullivan,
Lord Stirling, Greene, all loved him well
As officer and man.

When, Fabius-like, our Washington,
By firm and wise delay,
Had forced our hireling enemies
From Boston and her bay,
To our city here he quickly marched,
To face them once again :
For they had come with bristling fleet
Across the briny main.

The Asia, sixty-four gun ship,
In our East River lay.
A sloop was anchored 'neath her guns,
To us a wished-for prey :
For she was full of army stores,
While our men were in want ;
But she was girt with dangers round,
That stout hearts well might daunt.

Cool heads and ready hands must be
With those would cut her out ;
Yet Hale soon found in those around
Stout arms and hearts as stout.
They choose a light and handy boat,
And muffle well each oar,
Then wait the friendly veil of night
To reach the further shore.

"'Tis dark enough now, men, and we
Are far enough above ;
Silent and steady make your strokes
Our well-manned barge to shove.
The moon goes down at midnight ; we
Must hug the other side
Until we reach the opposing point,
And there in patience bide."

All patiently they sit and watch
The moon go down the sky;
And can, from far, the Asia's masts,
And frowning hull descry.
A single gun from that dark hull
Could sweep them all to death;
But calm they eye her as she lies,
And wait their leader's breath.

The moon has touched the horizon's edge;
And now her silver light
Gently withdraws and leaves them all
Involved in deepest night.
"This rising wind will serve our turn;
The tide is strongest now;
Quiet and quick the watchword is;
We'll board her on the bow."

The Asia's watch, from her high deck,
Can nothing hear or see,
Save rushing wind or swashing wave
To windward or to lee;
But the light bark speeds bravely on,
Until they dimly spy
The topmost rigging of the sloop
Against the darkening sky.

They reach her bow, make fast, and then,
Like leaping panthers, spring ;
Silent and swift they make their way ;
With hands and feet they cling.
The drowsy watch they gag and bind ;
Then pass them all below ;
Clap on the hatch ; the cable cut ;
And with the tide they go.

Then slowly, quietly, they hoist
Some sail for steerage way.
Hale takes the helm ; and steady steers,
Hoping the dawn of day.
It comes at last, that longed-for light,
From God's own blessed hand.
It gilds the sky ; it gilds the stream ;
And gilds the wished-for strand.

" Hurrah, we're safe ; the prize is won ;
Now up with every sail ;
And let her cleave the foaming waves,
Before the favoring gale.
We've blankets for our needy men,
And shoes to fence their feet,
And joyously, upon the wharves,
Our coming soon they'll greet."

The wharves are crowded ; thronging round
They eye the distant sail ;
And many a hope, and many a fear,
Weighs down the alternate scale ;
But, as she nearer comes, their hopes
Their many fears o'erwhelm.
They see, they know those on her deck,
And Hale is at the helm.

—"Hurrah for Hale."—Each manly throat
Rings out its heartfelt joy.
"Ha, ha ! John Bull but little thought
We'd thus his stores employ."
She nears the wharf ; down drop the sails ;
The sloop is quickly moored ;
Hale makes report ; his men march off ;
There floats the prize secured.

But soon, alas, our Hale grew sick,
And, as he lay along,
The British landed at Gravesend,
Ten thousand muskets strong.
Out there, upon Long Island's plains,
The hireling Hessians stood,
With the ranks of England's red-coat slaves
That shed our brethren's blood.

They turned our flank upon the left,
And gallant Sullivan,
'Twixt Clinton and De Heister's fire,
Lost many a daring man.
Discomfited and sad of heart,
Within their lines they lay ;
Till Washington across the stream
Safe drew them all away.

God sent to him a favoring wind,
And kindly shrouding fog,
That baffled Clinton's best bloodhounds :
His steps they could not dog.
But our great leader's mighty heart
With anguish deep was rent,
To think how many a freeman's head
Low down in death had bent.

Stirling and Sullivan were ta'en ;
Sore sick the gallant Greene ;
And many a once familiar face
Was nowhere to be seen.
There lay the foe across the stream,
But he'd no way to learn
What force they had, or how disposed,
That he might their blows return.

He called a council, and 'twas fixed
That some superior man
Must spy them out, and make report,
And all their works must plan.
To Colonel Knowlton 'twas assigned
To find the man they sought;
He called his officers around,
And earnest with them wrought.

But each one, silent, hung his head,
Or turned him cold away.
To be a spy, though sore the need,
That part they could not play.
Hale had come late to council, and
Was pale from his sick bed,
But when he saw them all draw back
He lifted up his head.

"I'll undertake it," calm and clear,
From his young lips outbroke:
But all the council crowded round,
And each against it spoke.
For he was loved by all the corps,
Both officers and men,
They sorrowed o'er him sick, and joyed
To see his face again.

"Nay Hale, it cannot, must not be.
An officer a spy!
And if discovered, from a tree
Hung like a thief to die!
Let some one from the ranks go out,
Or some camp follower keen.
Your epaulettes, for all our sakes,
You should not thus demean."

—"Hold, comrades, hold.—Your words are vain.
I thank you for your love;
But there are higher, holier thoughts,
Such earthly thoughts above.
We are not here on gay parade,
Our epaulettes to show.
We fight for freedom, undismayed,
Against a powerful foe.

"Our General asks it. Would he ask
Dishonoring deed or wrong?
No! and his voice my country's is,
For her my heart is strong
To dare a felon's death, or aught
May help her at her need.
If we draw back how can we pray
Our God her cause to speed?

"Whate'er she needs as glorious is,
For me, as loftiest plume
That ever decked the warrior's meed,
Where guns and swords make room.
So good-bye, comrades; if I fall,
Some one will take my place;
And, soon or late, in peace or war,
Each man must end his race."

So spake this youthful heart and bold,
This patriot pure and high;
Nor did his manly deeds his words,
In any point, belie.
To head-quarters he was ordered, they
Were then at Murray Hill,
That he might clear instructions get,
And learn his General's will.

Long time talked they together there,
Two noblest among men;
But never, on this earth of ours,
From that time met again.
One died in honored age, and one
In his youthful bloom was slain,
With a heart as pure, and a soul as high,
As e'er felt joy or pain.

Hale took the guise of schoolmaster,
Wandering in search of work,
'Neath plain brown clothes and broad-brimmed hat
His purposes must lurk.
He crossed the Sound at Norwalk,
When all was still and dark,
And safely trod on hostile ground
Ere rising of the lark.

Through English, Hessians, Waldeckers,
He passed in safety on,
Striving their numbers all to note,
And all their works to con.
From Brooklyn he crossed over here,
And passed along our streets ;
Though every soldier was his foe,
Yet all he calmly meets.

A single instant could bring him
To gibbet and to rope ;
But, in College Latin, still he notes
All that's within his scope.
At length, the information gained,
Placed safe within his shoe,
He crossed again to Brooklyn,
And from their lines withdrew.

'Twas early morn when on the shore,
At Huntington, he stood.
He waited but the appointed boat
To bear him o'er the flood.
'Twas close by Jesse Fleet's. The leaves
Were fluttering on the trees;
The rippling waves, in changing curves,
Obeyed the wandering breeze.

His task was done; the risk was run;
His knowledge all secure.
He'd but to cross the Sound again,
And all would then be sure.
A boat comes round the point.—'Tis she,—
The bark to bear him o'er.
He stands to wait, in careless ease,
Her progress to the shore.

—Too late! too late! he sees his fault.—
The British uniform
Is in the boat; and near must float
Some ship where foes thick swarm.
He turns too late! the sheltering trees
He never more may gain.
"Stand or you die!"—He yields perforce,—
And in the boat is ta'en.

How bitter ! oh how bitter to
The young and sanguine heart !
When the cup is dashed to earth that he
Raised up with lips apart.
But Hale his sadly sinking heart
Has force enough to hide.
A patient prisoner calm he meets
Whatever may betide.

They reach the ship, the Halifax,
And, when on deck they stand,
The lounging idlers crowd around
To see who's come from land.
Quick from the crowd a renegade
Cries out "'Tis Nathan Hale !
—A rebel dog—I know him well."
Hale turned a moment pale.

The shadow of his coming fate
Fell on him as he stood ;
And, for a single instant, it
Congealed his youthful blood.
But no fell fate a brave man daunts.
And soon his manly pride
Fired his full eye, and flushed his cheek,
And spread his nostrils wide.

As if he scorned the traitor's blood,
That fought against his land,
And raised, midst hosts of hireling swords,
His parricidal brand.
This traitor his own cousin was ;
A wretch, who kindred ties
And patriot hopes, our holiest thoughts,
Could both alike despise.

The Captain lent unwilling ear
To charges such as these,
Against a youth of form and face
Each manly heart to please.
But when, within Hale's shoe, were found
The plans and notes he'd ta'en,
He sent him to the city here with
Ill-dissembled pain.

At two o'clock, on that same morn,
The demon fire had waked
The sleepers from their pleasant dreams,
And they with terror quaked.
For the roaring flames came leaping on
From Whitehall up each street,
House after house devouring, till
Our College Green they meet.

There stayed their waves. The changing wind
Their billows backward swept,
But five hundred homes were desolate,
And many a woman wept.
Such the sad scene that met Hale's eyes,
As from the boat he came,—
The clanging bells, the rolling smoke,
And the far flashing flame.

But close they guarded him, and led,
To where, on Murray Hill,
Sir William Howe's head-quarters were,
In Beekman's mansion still.
Its owner a true patriot was,
And to Æsopus fled.
They seized his house, and rang his halls
To the hated Briton's tread.

In the garden stood a greenhouse, and
They brought the captive there.
The place was shorn of all its flowers,
The tiled floor was bare.
Bound, but undaunted, waiting doom,
The youthful Captain stood.
Whate'er he felt, his manly front
Betrayed no changing mood.

Sir William Howe sat there to judge,
With officers beside,
Their captive clad in plain homespun,
And they in all their pride :
Yet that young man so plain arrayed,
In history's page shall live,
When their gewgaws and titles all
No lingering gleam shall give.

Short was his trial, sharp his doom—
At daybreak he must die.
And now's led forth to hold secure
Till dawning tints the sky.
Close guarded to his prison cell,
The doors upon him close,
And he is left to think all night,
Or seek disturbed repose.

Our College then a prison was,
And it may be that Hale
Was placed within its strong stone walls,
With many a prisoner pale.
Yes ! in those halls where we've oft read
Of the heroes true of old,
This youthful hero slept, perhaps,
Before his death-knell tolled.

Old College ! thou art gone,—and those
Sweet memories of youth
That clustered fondly round thee ;
Young friendship's bright-eyed truth ;
The genial hours we all have spent
Beneath those grand old trees,
That rose, like towers, from out the earth,
Huge palaces of leaves ;

That pleasant green that heard so oft
Youth's light and ringing laugh,
Ere we went on life's pilgrimage,
With sober scrip and staff ;
Those lecture-rooms, where smothered jokes
With learning we inwove ;
Those chambers underground, where wits
In tilt and tourney strove ;

The many spots more sacred made
By memories of the dead,
Those who untimely left our sides
To seek their lowly beds ;—
Are gone ! all gone ! and what is more,
The very earth's removed,
Where trod the springing footsteps oft
Of those we knew and loved.

Oh ! had it not been better, still
To leave, midst mammon's waste,
That one green spot, those strong old walls,
Where patriot prisoners paced !
I speak not of our private griefs,
But, in this age of ours,
We hurry on with heedless hand
To pluck both fruit and flowers,

Not thinking of those men of old
Who shivered and who bled,
That we might all go warmly clothed,
And with the best be fed.
Had our old College, the Provost,
The Sugar House been kept,
Where crowded patriots moaned, grew sick,
And then in silence slept :

No place more holy could have been
Than where they used to pine,
And no more touching monument
Could architect divine.
Amidst our city's wealth and pride
They should have sacred been,
As shrines where patriot pilgrims still
Some holy thoughts might glean.

Thus Hale must have thought, in his lonely cell,
Of the martyrs bright of old,
The long, long line that have shed their blood
More precious far than gold.
They that have striven to raise our race
From all that's low and vile,
And borne, unshrinking, chains and death,
Rough rope or blazing pile.

But tenderer thoughts came throbbing through
His warm and youthful heart,
Of home and friends, and her, from whom
'Twas death indeed to part.
How oft he'd watched her graceful form
On household cares intent!
How oft beside the spinning wheel
As, to and fro, she went!

And, when the wars were over, she
Had promised him to wed;
Now,—he must die a felon's death,
And sleep in lonely bed.
He asked a Bible.—'Twas refused.
He sought a man of God,—
But Cunningham his jailer was;
More brutal never trod.

With coarse, loud laugh he answered him,
With oath, and gibe, and jeer.
Ev'n when he asked for paper, but
To write to those most dear.
A young lieutenant of the guard
Could not this sight endure,
But, ere he left, saw paper given
To Hale in hand secure.

Thus he sate down to write that night
His farewell words to those,
So near, so dear, now dearer still
Since life was at its close.
His sisters one, his parents one,
His brothers, now afar,
Fair Alice one,—her lovely eyes
Those lines will sadly mar.

His task is done, the light is gone—
He sits there in the dark,
And tears will course adown his cheeks,
Since none are by to mark.
But one and twenty summers had
Strewn flowers along his path,
Respect, affection, friendship, love,
Yes! all this bright life hath.

'Twas hard to leave them. Hard to die,
From every friend away,
A felon's death, midst flouting foes,
Who'd mock his senseless clay ;—
But soon his mind took loftier tone,
As he thought of duty done ;
And felt that the love of earth's best men
With his life he'd nobly won.

He knew his comrades would feel sad,
His friends forget him not ;
But he wondered if, in after years,
The same would be his lot ;
If we should win our freedom, and
Men histories should indite,
If they, in them, on any page,
His youthful name would write :

If the students of our colleges
Would ever hear that one,
A son of Yale, in Columbia slept,
To die with the rising sun.
Yes ! Hale ! across the gulf of years,
I'm standing here to-night
To tell them how you died for us,
And left this pleasant light.

Here, in the mightiest city that
  This broad, broad land can claim,
I'm telling old Columbia's sons
  Of you and of your fame.
God grant some hearts here in this throng
  With the sacred fire may burn
That lit your steps on glory's path
  That gilds your funeral urn!

Let them not wait occasion grand,
  But fill the present need.
As high your fame, a spy who died,
  As theirs that in battle bleed.
Let them Columbia's honored name
  With added fame increase,
And take their place midst that bright throng
  The patriots of peace.

But see! the first gray streaks of dawn
  Come stealing o'er the sky:
Hale leaves his restless couch that he
  May dress himself to die.
They come,—he meets them with calm face,
  And walks with firmest tread;
Upright his graceful, manly form,
  Uplifted is his head.

'Twas on a Sunday morning thus
They led him forth to die,
Saddening the quiet of the streets
With their death melody ;
But midst their flashing ranks
The pinioned prisoner paced
Proudly, as he a conqueror were,
And they his triumph graced.

In Chambers Street they halted ; and
The brutal Cunningham,
With negro Dick, his hangman foul,
Their cursed work began.
There was a graveyard to the north,
And from a branching tree
The fatal noose hangs ready
That's to set his spirit free.

Now, from his vest, young Hale takes out
The letters that he wrote,
To Cunningham he hands them there,
Who must their contents note.
But see ! he tears them up, and flings
Their fragments on the ground.
" The cursed rebels ne'er shall know
Such man's among them found."

'Twas a bitter pang that thrilled through Hale,
When he those fragments saw ;
But higher still did he lift his head,
And his curling lip up draw.
With cool contempt he gazed on him,
As turned the brute about,
And jeering called for his dying speech—
'Twas then those words broke out :

" My sole regret is that I've but
One life our land to give."
The furious brute laid hands on him,
That he might not longer live.

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'Tis done !—His manly form now swings
Between the earth and heaven.
The tender ties that bound him here
Thus rudely all are riven.

We know not where they buried him,
Belike beneath the tree ;
But patriot memories cluster there,
Where'er the spot may be.

Yes ! youthful martyr ! all our isle
To us more sacred's made,
Since on her breast thy manly form
In death's deep sleep was laid.

And still when comes September,
The month that saw thy death,
And the forest leaves begin to change
Beneath the frost-king's breath,
In cottage and in College hall,
Throughout our wide-spread land,
Let each faithful heart recall thy part
Amidst the patriot band.

Yes ! all our youths that manliest are,
And con the historic page,
Shall feel in turn thy patriot fire
To honor still their age.
Young maids, at twilight musing, sigh,
Soft-murmuring, and look grave,
As memory whispers them of one
So handsome and so brave.

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